3. Existentialism and Nietzschean Philosophy in “Zorba the Greek” 🎙️📒

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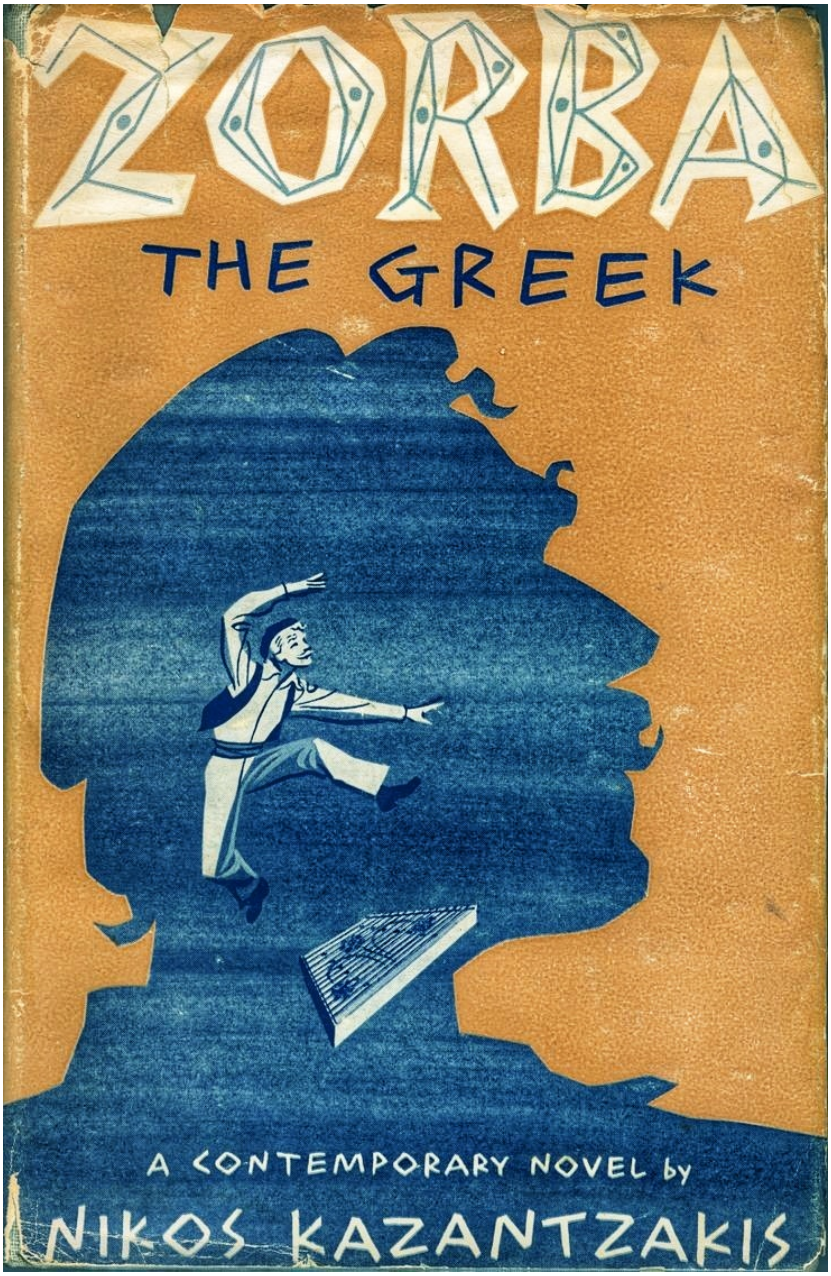

Freedom

The concept of freedom is central to the discussions between Zorba and the narrator. For Zorba, freedom is embodied in his pursuit of passions and avoidance of burdens that might limit his spontaneity. His lifestyle reflects a belief that true freedom comes from living in the moment and embracing life’s pleasures without constraints. In contrast, the narrator seeks freedom through intellectual and spiritual exploration, guided by Buddhist teachings that advocate detachment from worldly concerns. Initially, he views freedom as

a transcendental state, achievable only by escaping the material world. However, as the story progresses, he recognizes that this idealized form of freedom, characterized by emotional detachment and intellectual isolation, fails to offer a fulfilling existence.

The narrator's shift in perspective, influenced by Zorba, leads him to redefine freedom as a blend of earthly experiences, emotional richness, and even sexuality. He acknowledges that true freedom involves embracing the complexities of human life rather than retreating into abstract philosophies.

Tradition versus Modernity

In *Zorba the Greek*, the narrator's quest for a more authentic life leads him to Crete, where he hopes to escape modernity's perceived emptiness by immersing himself in traditional village life. He romanticizes this simpler existence as a remedy for his estrangement from contemporary culture and a path to a more meaningful existence. However, his idealization of traditional life is challenged when he encounters the village elders, who embody a blend of simplicity and harshness. The narrator's disillusionment grows as he witnesses the village's misogyny, superstition, and cruelty, such as the shocking act of castrating a pig for a meal. This confrontation forces him to reconsider his romantic notions of traditional life and recognize the limitations and inherent flaws in both modern and traditional worlds.

The Relationship between Men and Women

In *Zorba the Greek*, women are portrayed as a significant temptation and a source of moral conflict. They are often viewed through a lens of duality, embodying both the archetypal, saintly ideal and the more threatening, seductive reality. This dichotomy is evident in the narrator's interactions and the story's references to religious and mythological figures, such as the Virgin Mary and Eve, which highlight a deeply ingrained mistrust of women. The narrator's struggle to reconcile his spiritual ideals with his attraction to women illustrates his view of them as both alluring and perilous. He is torn between his spiritual aspirations and the temptation presented by the widow, reflecting his inability to see women as equals. Zorba, though more direct in his pursuit of pleasure, still regards women primarily as objects of sexual gratification rather than as complete individuals. His attitude reinforces the notion that honest relationships are dull and that women exist to satisfy his desires.

Overall, the novel critiques how men fail to integrate their sexual and spiritual aspects, leading to unhealthy relationships with women—either by avoiding them to maintain a false sense of piety or by exploiting them for physical pleasure without acknowledging their full humanity.

Dancing

Zorba's dancing serves as a profound manifestation of his zest for life. He repeatedly turns to dance as a form of emotional release and to convey feelings that words cannot capture. Unlike the narrator, who is ensnared by intellectual pursuits and books, Zorba

immerses himself in the present through dance. This is evident when Zorba engages in an ecstatic dance following a deep conversation with the narrator. By the novel's end, the narrator, having faced a significant failure, embraces the therapeutic benefits of dancing and seeks to learn Zorba's moves. Despite the joy Zorba derives from dance, his Dionysian approach lacks the Apollonian ability to create lasting stability in his life. He channels his passion into transient pleasures of dance and song but struggles to establish a consistent or structured existence. Consequently, while dance provides momentary fulfillment, Zorba continues to grapple with ongoing personal challenges.

The Apollonian and Dionysian Polarity in Zorba the Greek

In *Zorba the Greek*, the characters reflect Friedrich Nietzsche's concepts from *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche's dichotomy of Apollonian and Dionysian archetypes is evident through the narrator and Zorba. The narrator represents the Apollonian side, characterized by intellectualism and reason, while Zorba embodies the Dionysian spirit of passion and ecstasy. Nietzsche initially viewed the Apollonian impulse as opposed to the Dionysian drive but later recognized that balance between the two could create meaningful art. Zorba illustrates this tension; despite his joy and passion, he lacks deeper understanding, whereas the narrator begins to embrace Dionysian qualities by the end of the novel. Zorba's life, as a blend of joy and struggle, reflects Nietzsche's idea of life as an art form. Kazantzakis' portrayal of Zorba aligns with Nietzschean philosophy, showing a hero who lives passionately while integrating both strengths and weaknesses into a meaningful existence.

Two Deaths and Their Impact on Zorba

The deaths of the widow and Madame Hortense profoundly impact Zorba. The widow's brutal killing by envious villagers exposes the harsh realities of human cruelty and jealousy. Madame Hortense's death is equally distressing as her own relatives exploit her belongings, revealing the mercilessness that can follow one's passing. Though the book often objectifies women in sexual terms, reflecting the boys' discussions about women in a private setting, these deaths underscore the grim reality behind such perspectives. They shake Zorba deeply, highlighting the often unforgiving nature of life and the cruelty that can accompany the objectification of women.

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